

P 141918Z APR 09
FM SECSTATE WASHDC
TO AMEMBASSY COLOMBO PRIORITY

S E C R E T STATE 036734

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/14/2019

TAGS: PREL PHUM KDEM CE

SUBJECT: ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER MEETS WITH PALITHA KOHONA

Classified By: Michael Owen for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On April 10, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher met with Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona regarding the humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka. Boucher told Kohona that the Sri Lankan Army must halt the continued shelling of the safe zone and emphasized the need to accept a UN Special Representative, preferably during the April 13-14 humanitarian pause. A/S Boucher urged Kohona to issue the Sri Lankan visas which have been denied to workers from the International Committee for the Red Cross. Boucher informed Kohona that the US government would have to take into consideration the conduct of the war in determining whether we could support the proposed International Monetary Fund loan to Sri Lanka. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Boucher began the meeting by telling Kohona that we were concerned about the civilians trapped in the government-designated "safe zone", that we were meeting with the Tamil diaspora in the US, that we have been in contact with the UN after their recent visits, and that we issued a statement after a Co-Chairs phone call on April 9. Kohona responded, saying that the Sri Lankan government was concerned about all the international attention to the situation that was wrongly being directed at the government and that many &good people8 (he cited Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International) believed it was the Sri Lankan government's "duty to save hostages." He said he expected the conflict to "resolve itself soon." When pushed to clarify, he said he meant that the civilians would escape the safe zone (instead of through military action). He offered three possible scenarios to end the conflict: a) civilians would break free and the government would move in, b) the Tamil Tigers would put up one last offensive, forcing the civilians to die with them, or c) the international community would succeed in putting sufficient pressure on the Tamil Tigers that they would surrender.

Stop the Shelling

¶3. (S) Boucher told Kohona that the Sri Lankan government must stop shelling into the safe zone. When Kohona denied that shelling was occurring, Boucher showed Kohona a US government satellite image from the "safe zone" of three large craters caused by heavy weapons. Boucher noted that the image was taken between March 15-23, after Sri Lankan President Rajapaksa assured Secretary Clinton in a March 13 phone conversation that the government was not shelling into the "safe zone." Kohona said he was "suspicious" of the purported location of the image and wrote down the geo-coordinates to verify. (Note: The SECRET SENSITIVE For Display Only image was shown, and not given, to Kohona.) Boucher reemphasized that we were watching the situation closely.

Special Envoy By Any Other Name

¶4. (C) At a dinner on April 9, Kohona told Boucher the

Sri Lankan government would be reluctant to accept a "Special Envoy" and that the international community should find another name to make the concept more palatable to the government. At the April 10 meeting, Boucher reiterated the need for someone acceptable to both sides to enter the conflict zone during a humanitarian pause. He stated that the Envoy's mandate would be securing the release of civilians and finding a way for the Tigers to lay down arms. Kohona suggested that Australian diplomat Michael Smith could fill this role. Boucher asked for Kohona's assistance in convincing the Sri Lankan leadership to accept such a person on an urgent basis, indicating that an Envoy could be critical during any humanitarian pause.

Internally Displaced Persons

¶15. (C) Boucher touched on the plight of internally displaced persons and emphasized the need to resettle them quickly. Kohona offered that the government had no intention of keeping people in camps long-term and would need international post-conflict assistance to resettle displaced persons. Boucher said that the US and other countries were willing to help, but that the Sri Lankan government would be better served if they devise a clear plan for resettlement, so donors could identify needs and support them. He continued to press Kohona to give international organizations more and better access to camps. Acting Director for Sri Lanka Diane Kelly noted that international workers present in reception centers should be permitted to speak with displaced persons as they are processed by the government.

¶16. (C) Boucher raised the issue of outstanding visas for International Committee of the Red Cross workers, urging that visas be issued quickly. Kohona rejected this stating the government's view that these workers were not needed now that the tsunami relief efforts had ended; they were taking jobs away from Sri Lankan doctors. Boucher and Kelly reiterated that Red Cross workers performed a number of functions, not just medical assistance, and their presence was important.

International Monetary Fund

¶17. (C) At the April 9 dinner, Boucher told Kohona that the U.S. government did not want to finance military operations and would be concerned about the impact continued fighting would have on Sri Lanka's economic prospects and its success in completing an International Monetary Fund program. Kohona pushed back hard saying that the government was determined to finish the war, they had fought the war without the loan, and they would continue even without the loan. At the April 10 meeting, Boucher reinforced that the loan will get very careful scrutiny from the U.S. government and there may be more questions on the loan in light of the current circumstances. Kohona noted that funds from the loan would be used to shore up reserves allowing Sri Lanka to repay its debts, many of which are owed, he claimed, to "the West." He added quickly that he was not saying that Sri Lanka would default on its debts to Western banks.

Political Solution

¶18. (C) Turning to political matters, Boucher suggested the Sri Lankan government start a genuine dialogue with Tamils and the Tamil diaspora. Kohona said that the government held a meeting with self-selected diaspora members from several countries and plans to hold future events. He said that many Tamils feels the Tamil National Alliance are not their true representatives

and are merely puppets of the Tamil Tigers. Boucher noted that we had met with many members of the diaspora who felt the same way, but the government needed to find a way to involve Tamils in the political process.

Comment

¶9. (C) Kohona did not deviate from the Sri Lankan government script on any issues we raised with him.
End Comment.

CLINTON